

## The First Reading Lesson.

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"You don't mean to say you would go plump into words of three or four syllables before a child knows his letters?"

"It is possible to read words without knowing the alphabet, as you may know a face without singling out its features; but we learn not only the names but the *sounds* of the letters before we begin to read words."

"Our children learn their letters without any teaching. We always keep by us a shallow table drawer, the bottom covered half an inch deep with sand. Before they are two, the babies make round O and crooked S, and T for Tommy, and so on, with dumpy, uncertain little fingers. The elder children teach the little ones by way of a game."

"The sand is capital! We have various devices, but none so good as that. Children love to be doing. The funny, shaky lines the little finger makes in the sand will be ten times as interesting as the shapes the eye sees."

"But the reading! I can't get over three syllables for the first lesson. Why, it's like teaching a twelve months old child to waltz?"

"You say that because we forget that a group of letters is no more than the *sign* of a word, while a word is only the vocal sign of a thing or an act. This is how the child learns. First, he gets the notion of table; he sees several tables; he finds they have legs, by which you can scramble up; very often covers, which you may pull off; and on them many things lie, good and pleasant for a baby to enjoy; sometimes, too, you can pull these things off the table, and they go down with a bang, which is nice. The grown-up and, by and by, baby says 'table' too; and the word 'table' comes to mean, in a vague way, all this to him. 'A round

table,' 'on the table,' and so on, form part of the idea of 'table' to him. In the same way baby chimes in when his mother sings. She says, 'Baby, sing,' and, by and by, notions of 'sing,' 'kiss,' 'love,' dawn on the baby brain."

"Yes, the darlings! and it's surprising how many words a child knows even before he can speak them; 'pussy,' 'dolly,' 'carriage,' soon convey interesting ideas to him."

"That's just it. Interest the child in the thing, and he soon learns the *sound-sign* for it—that is, its name. Now, I maintain that, when he is a little older, he should learn the *form-sign*—that is, the printed word—on the same principle. It is far easier for a child to read plum-pudding than to read to, to, because 'plum-pudding' conveys a far more interesting idea."

"That may be, when he gets into words of three or four syllables; but what would you do while he's in words of one syllable—indeed, of two or three letters?"

"I should never put him into words of one syllable at all. The bigger the word, the more striking the look of it, and, therefore, the easier it is to read, provided always that the idea it conveys is interesting to a child. It is sad to see an intelligent child of five toiling over a reading-lesson infinitely below his capacity—ath, eth, ith, oth, uth—or, at the very best, 'The cat sat on the mat.' How should we like to begin to read German, for example, by toiling over all conceivable combinations of letters, arranged on no principle but similarity of sound; or, worse still, that our readings should be graduated according to the number of letters each word contains? We should be lost in a hopeless fog before a page of words of three letters, all drearily like one another, with no distinctive features for the eye to seize upon—but the child? 'Oh, well—children are different; no doubt it is good for the child to grind in this mill!' But this is only one of many ways in which children are needlessly and cruelly oppressed!"

"You are taking high moral ground! All the same, I don't think I am convinced. It is far easier for a child to spell cat, cat, than to spell plum-pudding, plum-pudding."

"But spelling and reading are *two* things. You must learn to spell in order to *write* words, not to *read* them. A child is droning over a reading-lesson, spells cough, you

say 'cough,' and she repeats. By dint of repetition, she learns at last to associate the look of the word with the sound, and says 'cough' without spelling it; and you think she has arrived at 'cough' through *cough*. Not a bit of it; *cough* spells *cough*!"

"Yes; but 'cough' has a silent *u*, and a *gh* with the sound of *f*. There, I grant, is a great difficulty. If only there were no silent letters, and if all letters had always the same sound, we should, indeed, have reading made easy. The phonetic people have something to say for themselves."

"You would agree with the writer of an article in a recent number of a leading review: 'Plough ought to be written and printed *plow*; through, *thru*; enough, *enuf*; ought, *aut* or *ort*;' and so on. All this goes on the mistaken idea that in reading we look at the letters which compose a word, think of their sounds, combine these, and form the word. We do nothing of the kind; we accept a word, written or printed, simply as the symbol of a word we are accustomed to say. If the word is new to us we may try to make something of the letters, but we know so well that this is a shot in the dark, that we are careful not to say the new word until we have heard some one else say it."

"Yes, but children are different."

"Children are the same, 'only more so.' We could, if we liked, break up a word into its sounds, or put certain sounds together to make a word. But these are efforts of mind beyond the range of children. First, as last, they learn to know a word by the look of it, and, the more striking it looks, the easier it is to recognise; provided, always, that the printed word is one which they already know very well by sound and by sense."

"It is not clear yet; suppose you tell me, step by step, how you would give your first reading lesson. An illustration helps one so much."

"Very well; Bobbie had his first lesson yesterday—on his fifth birthday. The lesson was part of the celebration. By the way, I think it's rather a good plan to begin a new study with a child on his birthday, or some great day; he begins by thinking the new study a privilege."

"That is a hint; but go on; did Bobbie know his letters?"

"Yes, he had picked them up, as you say; but I had been careful not to allow any small readings. You know how

Susanna Wesley used to retire to her room with the child who was to have his first reading-lesson, and not to appear again for some hours, when the boy came out able to read a good part of the first chapter of Genesis? Well, Bobbie's first reading lesson was a solemn occasion too, for which we had been preparing for a week or two. First, I bought a dozen penny copies of the 'History of Cock Robin'—good bold type, bad pictures, that we cut out.

"Then, we had a nursery pasting day—pasting the sheets on common drawing paper—six one side down, and six the other; so that, now, we had six complete copies, and not twelve.

"Then, we cut up the *first page only*, of all six copies, line by line, and word by word. We gathered up the words and put them in a box, and our preparations were complete.

"Now for the lesson. Bobbie and I are shut in by ourselves in the morning room. I always use a blackboard in teaching the children. I write up, in good clear 'print' hand

### *Cock Robin.*

Bobbie watches with the more interest because he knows his letters. I say, pointing to the word, 'cock robin,' which he repeats.

"Then, the words in the box are scattered on the table, and he finds half-a-dozen 'cock robins' with great ease.

"We do the same thing with 'sparrow,' 'arrow,' 'said,' 'killed,' 'who,' and so on, till all the words in the verse have been learned. The words on the blackboard grow into a column, which Bob reads backwards and forwards, and every way, except as the words run in the verse.

"Then Bobbie arranges the loose words into columns like that on the board.

"Then, into columns of his own devising, which he reads off.

"Lastly, culminating joy, (the whole lesson has been a delight!) he finds among the loose words, at my dictation,

Who killed Cock Robin  
I said the sparrow  
With my bow and arrow  
I killed Cock Robin.

Arranging the words in verse form.

"Then, I had still one unmutilated copy, out of which Bob had the pleasure of reading the verse, and he read it forwards and backwards. So long as he lives he will know those twelve words."

"No doubt it was a pleasant lesson; but, think of all the pasting and cutting!"

"Yes, that is troublesome. I wish some publisher would provide us with what we want—nursery rhymes, in good bold type, with boxes of loose words to match—a separate box, or division, for each page, so that the child may not be confused by having too many words to hunt amongst. The point is that he should *see*, and *look at*, the new word many times, so that its shape becomes impressed on his brain."

"I see; but he is only able to read 'Cock Robin'; he has no general power of reading."

"On the contrary, he will read those twelve words wherever he meets with them. Suppose he learns ten words a day, in half-a-year he will have at least six hundred words; that is, he will know how to read."

"Excellent, supposing your children *remember* all they learn. At the end of a week, mine would remember 'Cock-robin' perhaps, but the rest would be gone!"

"Oh, but we keep what we get! When we have mastered the words of the second verse, Bob runs through the first in the book, naming words here and there as I point to them. It takes less than a minute, and the ground is secured."

"The first lesson must have been long?"

"I'm sorry to say it lasted half-an-hour. The child's interest tempted me to do more than I should."

"It all sounds very attractive—a sort of game—but I cannot be satisfied that a child should learn to read without knowing the powers of the letters. You constantly see a child spell a word over to himself, and then pronounce it; the more so, if he has been carefully taught the sounds of the letters—not merely their names."

"Naturally, for, though many of our English words are each a law unto itself, others offer a key to a whole group, as arrow gives us sparrow, marrow, harrow; but we have alternate days—one for reading, the other for word-building—and that is one way to secure variety; and, so, the joyous interest which is the real secret of success."

"I suppose the 'word-building' would be, practically, spelling with you? But you must tell me about that another day. Anyway, I shall try your plan, but shall keep the children up in the sounds of the letters all the same. Thus, they will have 'two strings to their bow.'"

THE EDITOR.

